

# **Chasing the Image**

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Visual Arts  
York University, Toronto Ontario

March, 2017

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**Abstract:**

My exhibition and paper addresses the physicality of 'the image', specifically that of the printed image and its material substrate, whether that image is photographically produced, or one created from printmaking processes. Several years ago I inherited a family archive of photographic negative, prints and slides that date from 1940 onward. These photographs form the genesis of my work. I often begin by sanding away areas of original contact prints to reconfigure the narrative structure of the image. I also use these images to produce large serigraphs on Mylar. Frequently I embellish these works with silver leaf - referencing the silver oxide that forms the foundation for light-sensitive exposures. Along with the sanded photographs and serigraphic prints, I have created an artist book consisting of two decks of trading cards. These cards contain imagery taken from the photo-collection as well as sentence fragments that I develop while sanding the prints.

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## Introduction

I have always been a maker; an object maker, a vessel maker but lately I have been an image-maker. Consequently, this paper will look at the physicality of 'the image', specifically that of the printed image and its material substrate, whether that image is photographically produced, or one created out of printmaking processes. It is toward this meeting of materiality and image that my work is orientated – with regard to both my source material and the finished works I create. The starting point for this body of work is a family photo collection, dating back to the mid 1940's, that was given to me by an aunt as she was preparing for a geriatric stage of her life. These amateur photographs, some housed in an album while others simply stored in a shoebox, contain images that are personal, powerful and haunting. I will look at the significance of the personal 'archive' along with our desire to collect, classify and preserve photographs that are often interpreted as a container for memory.

While all the works presented in the thesis exhibition, *Chasing the Image*,<sup>1</sup> have their genesis in the analogue photograph, it is the physical manipulation (non-photographically) of these images and what that manipulation implies, that is of importance to me. By altering the original photographic print, through the removal of emulsion, oxides and paper (that is often read as visual information), a new image is created. In addition to altering the material make up of some photographs, I select other photographs from the collection to digitally scan and enlarge. Utilizing the print process of serigraphy, I print these images on alternative, non-traditional substrates. This is a different type of alteration of the original, one, which I will speak to later in my thesis paper. By intervening with the analogue photograph, I will reflect on how images that have been held in stasis for over fifty years are subsequently disrupting both my interpretation of linear time and my personal history.

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibition held in Special Projects Gallery, Goldfarb Building, York University, March 2017

## **Part One: The Photograph as Image and Object**

### **Proliferation of the Photographic Image**

I have been collecting and using found photographs within my art practice for several years now. Photographically produced images are a constant in my studio activity, acting like an umbrella held by a parent, that permits their toddler to safely explore their surroundings. As the maker, I feel it is important to investigate what photography 'is' and what it may mean to hold a physical embodiment of a moment from the past. What goes beyond that captured image and what does it say about our fascination with and our motivation behind collecting such images?

Throughout history, cultures have shown a continued interest in capturing and sharing imagery as a way of announcing that "we were here". When we first became makers, in the time of prehistory for example, someone would cover his or her hand in pigment and press it against a cave wall. The transferred image of the maker's hand, could be considered the origin of the practice of making prints, or as I will continue to refer as "print-making". Our need to make such images is a form of existential assertion; concrete evidence that we exist and our presence matters. Centuries later, a craftsman using hand tools, a stable matrix, and ink, would create reproducible media, such as engravings, etchings and lithographs as a way of documenting their surroundings for both self-fulfillment and posterity. Our fascination with image making eventually led to experiments that would fix an image on a surface through the use of light (what became known as photography). Today, it is widely accepted

that Joseph Niépce (professionally known as Nicéphore Niépce) created the earliest known stable photograph. Around 1826, Niépce coated a paper with a light-sensitive mordant to capture the view from a window at his estate, Le Gras, in the Burgundy region of France. (see Fig A.)

Fig. A - Joseph Niépce  
View from window  
Circa 1826



What Niépce perhaps didn't realize then was the immense social impact that his discovery would have on image-makers from that moment on. This invention resulted in a shift from recording our surroundings by a hand-made image to one created through the science of reflected light itself.

During the early days of photography, only a narrow segment of society was privileged enough to take photographs as the first widely used processes, such as Daguerreotypes and Tintypes allowed the photographer to create only one portable image for every moment that light passed through the camera's lens. The chemist, William Henry Fox Talbot is credited for creating the first photographic negative and thus, the ability to make multiple prints from the same exposure. Rather than exposing light from the chosen subject to the final print, an intermediary step was developed (a stable negative) which allowed the possibility of making identical multiples from a single exposure. With the invention of the photographic negative,

Talbot changed our understanding of image making and subsequently how we perceive and experience time. It is because of Talbot's invention that I have been able to inherit such a rich collection of family images.

But is creating an image by fixing light as it passes through a camera lens really that different than previous methods of image creation? I believe so. While portrait painters viewed the camera as a tool to help generate a likeness of the client or model, the invention of photography allowed the viewer the ability to gaze upon an image created directly from the subject and not mediated through another person's interpretation. In essence, the viewer could study a 'truer' representation of time - an event frozen in paper. It soon became apparent that photography was something much more profound and complex than a simple reproduction tool. Unlike a painting or drawing, which is always subjective, a photograph contains the promise of indisputable truth, the truth that a specific moment existed.

Another key player in the evolution of contemporary photography is George Eastman, the founder of the Kodak Company. Eastman revolutionized photography by creating an industry whereby documenting daily life through photographic prints became almost a right of the western world. By standardizing and simplifying the photographic process, along with making it economically affordable to the average worker, Kodak put the magic of time machines in the hands of the unskilled person. In fact, the advertising campaign, 'you press the button, we do the rest', was devised by George Eastman himself in 1888 for his then-revolutionary roll-film camera. "The Kodak camera came loaded with enough film for 100 exposures. When the last



exposure had been made, the camera was sent to Eastman's factory for the film to be processed. The camera, reloaded with a fresh film, was then returned to its owner together with a set of prints. Thus began the modern developing and processing industry.”<sup>2</sup>

I am a product of the Kodak era of the snapshot. Growing up in the 1960's in North America, I was able to experience life twice - once first hand and secondly via the family photo album. The ubiquitous “family photo album” has greatly influenced my image making and without a very specific family album that I now possess, my exhibition would not exist as it is.

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Reference. Accessed January 08, 2017.  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=you%2Bpress%2Bthe%2Bbutton%2Bwe%2Bdo%2Bthe%2Brest&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>

## The Family Photo Album

### *ar·hive*

*noun: a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.*

*Verb: to place or store (something)<sup>3</sup>*

### *prov·e·nance*

*Noun: The beginning of something's existence; something's origin.*

*A record of ownership of a work of art or an antique, used as a guide to authenticity or quality.<sup>4</sup>*

### *al·bum*

*Noun: A blank book for the insertion of photographs, stamps, or pictures.<sup>5</sup>*

It is important to note that my thesis exhibition is comprised entirely of images taken from a collection of snapshots that I inherited from an aging aunt. This collection would not typically be classified as “art photography” but rather; it is simply a chronicle of photo-documentation of my mother’s sister and her husband’s life together. My uncle was the one taking most of these photographs, a jolly farmer with basic education. My uncle’s motivation in creating these photographs was most likely not driven by any heroic or artistic aspirations. I believe that, like so many people of his era, the camera was viewed as a tool for recording life events. The snapshot and photo album were intended for future personal reference – a container for memories.

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford Dictionary. Accessed Jan 20, 2017. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/archive>

<sup>4</sup> Oxford Dictionary. Accessed Jan 20, 2017.  
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/provenance>

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Dictionary. Accessed Jan 20, 2017. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/album>

Renowned critic and author, Susan Sontag, beautifully describes this era of photography as follows: “our photographer [is] on a “journey of discovery,” visiting such new realms as “the world from above,” “the world under the magnifying glass,” “the beauties of every day,” “the unseen universe,” “the miracle of light,” “the beauty of machines,” the picture that can be “found in the street”.<sup>6</sup> In many ways the democratizing snapshot of the everyday positions the photographer on a cultural/social safari, shooting images of his/her class. The family photo-album became a personal archive that immortalizes every-day experiences, a physical record that could be used to illuminate storytelling.

The aunt and uncle who assembled this archive are very important to me. It was at their wedding that my own parents met. The aunt I speak of is my mother’s eldest sister and the uncle in question is my father’s first cousin. In 2013, when preparing for a move to a retirement home, my aunt offered me their entire photo collection. At the time I felt it was easier simply to say yes, thinking I would dispose of the library of images at a later date. Now in possession of them, curiosity took hold of me and I began to examine the photographs.

I was immediately struck by the uneasy realization that I was the keeper of a family member’s life experiences through a collection of recorded light. These slides, prints and negatives contain images created by the very light that reflected off of people that are no longer available to me. This collection documents my aunt and uncle’s entire lifetime together - from their early days as newlyweds through the

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<sup>6</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

many road trips they took to their later years as retirees. I had inadvertently become the steward of their memory log. Another observation I had while viewing this collection was how little I actually knew about my extended family. While my aunt and uncle were usually present at family celebrations, most of the people and places depicted in this collection remain unknown to me. I was handed a movie script without being told whom the actors are or even what the plot is. I had been given something very powerful and I recognized that I wanted to integrate this into my work.

What distinguishes a “collection” from an “archive”? For me the difference happens when someone starts to classify elements inherent in the collection. This photo archive consists of over three thousand images, comprised of black and white negatives, photographic prints and transparency slides. The dates of these images range from the mid 1940’s to the late 1980’s. I assume my uncle took the majority of the images, as he is seldom seen in any of the images. My uncle was not a professional photographer by any means, so I would classify this collection as a great example of the amateur snapshot era. While some of the images are typical tourist tropes, many of them possess a genuine, non-idealized directness, a rich conversation between the photographer and his surroundings. The majority of these images depict the Canadian landscapes, which does not surprise me as my aunt and uncle were avid travellers and always relished the outdoors. Occasionally there are figures present in the landscape and often they are caught mid-gesture, almost unaware that the individual’s actions were being captured. This group of ‘figures in the landscape’ is

what I find most intriguing. The relationship between a figure and its surrounding landscape often demonstrates the tension between the two elements. Sometime that tension is harmonious and at other times it is in great contrast. I looked for images that exhibit both. Also I am very much a loner and as a youngster I spent many hours of my day outside, exploring my rural neighbourhood – perhaps this is another reason why images of a single figure in the landscape speak so loudly to me.

### **How do we read a photograph?**

When I first look at a photograph I begin searching for a visual trigger, a trigger that is familiar - one that may launch a memory. I believe many things happen as our eyes scan a photographic image, but first, let 's consider some of the formal structural elements that act to draw us in and engage us. French literary philosopher Roland Barthes, is quick to point out "Photography has been, and is still, tormented by the ghost of Painting."<sup>7</sup> While he recognizes that there are many similarities with the traditions of painting such as composition and framing, Barthes also suggests that there is something unique to photography that can capture our attention, that illusive element that draws us in and keeps us engaged. Barthes uses two important terms to describe the key features of photographic images: the studium and the punctum. He

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

proclaims that studium “always refers to a classical body of information”.<sup>8</sup> Studium is the term we can use to describe the formal elements that comprise the image - the stage. Our reading of the studium relates back to the history of painting and is contextualized by our acquired knowledge of the world. When we see an automobile with rounded fenders sporting a polished chrome bumper, we can situate that image in a specific era and cultural phenomena because of what we already know about western society and its obsession with the automobile during the post-war years. Punctum, on the other hand is quite different and less easy to identify. “This second element which will disturb the studium I shall, therefore, call the punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident that pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”<sup>9</sup> Like a bruise, this unexpected, almost chance happening, called punctum, leaves a lasting impression as a reminder of the original blow. Out of the thousands of images in my collection, I often question myself as to why I am drawn toward a specific photograph over another – to choose one that I wish to use in my own work? Is there a ‘punctum’ in these images that arrests my gaze and beckons me to investigate further?

In his book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes also observes that every photograph has three common elements: *operator*, *spectator* and *target*. The *operator* is the one who employed the camera, exposing the film. The *spectator* is anyone who views the image once it has been created and the *target* is the subject framed within the photograph

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

itself or what is being “shot” by the camera lens. These three variables comprise each photograph and often aid us in classifying them into categories and sub-categories. During the first round of investigating this family archive I decided to separate it into various categories, defined by media such as negatives, prints and slides. For my graduate research I narrowed my focus solely to the black and white negative and black and white contact prints. I made the decision early on that I would not incorporate any colour photography, as my main concern was ‘the image’ and I felt that I would be too easily seduced by Chroma.

Being born in 1962 to a Canadian working-class family, I was destined to be influenced first by the phenomenon of amateur photography. When an amateur photographer snaps his wife, shrouded by a kerchief and donning sunglasses, standing in front of a concrete dinosaur roadside attraction, I begin to question exactly what kind of ‘reality’ he is capturing? Unlike the choreographed illusion of advertising photography, the amateur photographer captures a rawness that is inherent in the less calculated, spontaneous moment. This awkward, alternate reality has long held my attention as it simultaneously exposes a partial truth but is often obscured by a lack of complete understanding that leaves the viewer wondering what was happening just beyond the camera’s field of view?

I also recognize that I belong to an unusual generation. Mine is a very narrow segment of history where people were surrounded by the ubiquitous analogue photograph. My grandparents never owned a camera and my children are much more familiar with digital files of jpegs than the physicality of the contact print. Until

recently, I was unaware of the impact that the prevalence of this kind of object-image could have.

What makes the analogue image so different from the digital? One of the more obvious differences is the fact that the physical photographic print visibly degrades; it creases and gets fingerprints on it, making it a more obvious marker of time. Sontag, explains in, *On Photography*, exactly how the analogue photograph is time embodied. “The photographer is willy-nilly engaged in the enterprise of antiquing reality, and photographs are themselves instant antiques. The photograph offers a modern counterpart of that characteristically romantic architectural genre, the artificial ruin: the ruin which is created in order to deepen the historical character of the landscape, to make nature suggestive – suggestive of the past.”<sup>10</sup> Here she states that the photograph is both representational of a specified past but through it’s physical presence it is also somewhat artificially constructed, not a full truth. These are key elements that I enjoy addressing when I engage in image making.

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<sup>10</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.



## **Part Two: Creative Methods and Works in Exhibition**

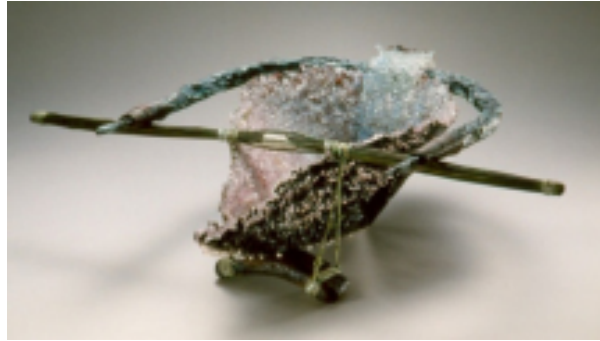
### **The Sanded Photograph**

At this point I wish to address exactly how I have integrated this photo-archive (and its implications) into my studio work. Firstly, it is important to know that I am a materialist at heart. I possess a very deep fascination with object making and my first tenure at a post-secondary institution was not at a traditional fine art institution but instead, was at a design school in the early 1980's.<sup>11</sup> A respect for materials, tradition and process became imbedded in my studio practice over thirty years ago. This very interest in material process is what led me to pursue an education in fine craft. After apprenticing at a studio pottery, I attended Sheridan College, School of Design to further my interest in the handmade. This school, founded by Vietnam draft dodgers, focused on the Bauhaus philosophy of integrating the handmade with classical arts and encouraged makers to possess a practical engagement with the everyday. Form should follow function. At that time, Sheridan College offered study in clay, glass, fibre, metal and wood and as a student, you were expected to engage with a minimum of three of the five media and I decided to focus my interest in clay, glass and metal. My respect for objects began and my exploration of materiality was established. My early works (see fig. B) were driven by form and materiality and often referenced historic narratives; these interests still linger in what I do today.

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<sup>11</sup> I graduated from Sheridan School of Design in Mississauga, Ontario in 1985 with High-Honours, receiving a Diploma in Contemporary Craft.

Fig. B - Timothy Laurin, *Shield*  
Glass, Metal, Wood, Coral. 1986



The term, materiality, has its roots in the Latin word, *materie* (the physical material to build with) and is directly linked to our desire to understand, or attempt to understand, “things in themselves”. I am interested in the physical properties of the materials I choose to use. What is the glass-ness of glass? How can I best demonstrate a material’s inherent properties when creating form? What are the physical qualities that separate one material from another, and how do I celebrate these properties visually? Questions like this are ever present when I am engaged in making. Not surprisingly then, while I gaze upon my aunt and uncle’s photographs, the physical presence of these negative, prints and slides also speak deeply to me. Holding them in my hands offers me a direct connection to my family and it’s past, a past that is simultaneously known and unknown.

Part of my earlier education saw me spending a great deal of time in a darkroom; exposing and developing fiber based photographic prints. I have always enjoyed watching silver-imbedded paper oxidize, allowing the image matrix to present itself. The understanding of how a black and white print is crafted has enabled me to fully appreciate how the camera captures light to form a lasting image.

I am reminded of this magic whenever I gaze upon the prints that I now possess. I find myself longing to reverse time so that I may experience these tiny images at their moment of creation. If only I could shake free the light held in these photographs to better understand a mysterious part of my heritage. I desire to reach inside these prints and touch my past. A pivotal moment in the evolution of my work occurred in December of 2015 when I discovered a particular contact print. This small print represents two women standing on a train platform, however, a lens flare, obscures one of the figure's faces. (see fig. C) I was struck by the way this visual erasure of the image resembled a "sanding away" of the image. It was at this moment that I questioned to myself, "what if I was to physically sand away the emulsion?" Taking a piece of 1500 grit Emery paper I began sanding other photographs from this collection. Immediately I was engaged – engaged in the sanding gesture but also excited at how the image was being transformed. I was wonder-struck. By interacting with the information contained in the photograph I realized that by altering the studium, I was rewriting the narrative of the image, a narrative that had been held in suspension for many years.



Fig.C – Lens flare



Fig.D – Sanded Photograph

Coincidentally, what I consider my first successful work in this sanded-photograph series is of a solo silhouette - the very same figure that was obscured by the lens flare, standing on the same train platform. (see fig.D)

What began, as a simple question of “what if”, has now become an obsession and is occupying many hours of my studio practice. My print-studio inking slab has been transformed into a sanding station, surrounded by strategically folded emery cloth, a magnifying glass and several piles of contact prints waiting to be reconfigured. In many ways, I have become an analogue version of the popular Adobe software, Photoshop. When a word is crossed out yet remains visible, it signifies that a word is inadequate yet necessary. I feel that the evident erasure in these images does exactly the same thing, simultaneously revealing and concealing by suggesting that the absence is a necessary presence.

Beyond the physical satisfaction of sanding these prints, what does the action of altering original analogue photographs imply? Many who visit my studio express their shock that I would physically abrade the ‘original’ photograph. For me it is necessary, for it is this very piece of paper that has the original light-energy stored within. There is a certain reverence placed on a photograph, an assumption that the image is an immutable truth. It is important then, that I remove the original silver nitrate that was activated by light many years ago. While I agree that the photo can act as a trigger for memory, it is not memory in physical form. Pierre Nora states, “Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.”<sup>12</sup> Just as that light, reflecting off of someone’s face, burning an image into a negative has vanished, so too has the original moment. What remains is a systematic trace of oxidized metal on paper that we can read as an image. My sanding disrupts

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<sup>12</sup> Nora, Pierre. “Realms of Memory.” In *Memory*, edited by Ian Farr, 62-70. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012.

the coherence of the coding; a photograph that was formerly rooted in the past has become new in the present. As I sand away the emulsion, I breathe in my family's past moments. If I follow the definitions of my aboriginal ancestors, I would be considered a Berdache/Shaman. Berdache is a term reserved for those within the first nations cultures that possess multiple gender identities while the Shaman is considered to have magical powers and be able to connect with the spiritual world.<sup>13</sup> The ritualistic act of sanding these photographs is reminiscent of a Shaman casting a spell or calling forth a ghost from the past.

Barthes suggests that unlike painting or drawing, the photographic print contains a greater truth, as it is more closely related to the referent – the physicality of light has crafted an object and not a logarithmic code. “Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past.”<sup>14</sup> These contact prints prove I exist, possessing layers of light, time and the potential of the new reality - a palimpsest.

When sanding photographs, I integrate many aspects of my studio environment to my personal habits. Because I suffer from insomnia, I often find myself awake in the middle of the night. It is then that I sneak out to my sanding area and quietly work away under the glow of a single lamplight. The silence of early morning provides me a contemplative solitude that is ideal for this process. When I sand, I am guided by imaginings of my family's heritage - based on both lore and fact. Much like the wiping of an intaglio plate, the repetitive gesture of sanding transports me into an alternative world. I find myself fabricating scenarios to be played out by the unknown actors portrayed in these photographs. The stories I remember from my

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<sup>13</sup> The Berdache /Shaman were considered to inherently possess the finest craftsmanship skills and held prominent positions within their tribe.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

childhood are seeds that sprout some unusual narratives, a new act is written to replace old stagings. I believe that action is closely related to cognition. Artist, William Kentridge, is known for his belief that bodily movement aids our imagination. I realize that I think best when my hands are active. Sanding keeps me thinking.

I have begun documenting the alternate narratives that emerge while I sand these photographs. A journal now resides next to my sanding station, patiently waiting for me to record short phrases, such as; "What Dave didn't realize was that his wife, Marie, was having an affair with the neighbour, Ruth. It had been going on for some time and he died never knowing the truth." Much like memory itself, these tiny scripts have elements of truth but are blended with fictitious thought or speculation. With each passing stroke of sandpaper I remove more traces from the photograph and simultaneously add another line to the scene playing out in my head. Like a tableau vivant, the original subjects, or targets, become actors, staged within the proscenium of the photo frame.

Sontag writes, "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."<sup>15</sup> The paper print that I hold in my hand is a reminder of linear time and the role that time plays with our mortality. While my aunt and uncle are no longer living, these visual traces of their life can find a new existence in my work.

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<sup>15</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

When beginning a sanded work, I am always unsure of the outcome. What do I remove and what do I leave intact? These questions quickly disappear once I begin and suddenly the image itself is telling me how to navigate. When the emulsion's seal is broken, it is as though the image unfolds and rearranges before me. Often during this process, what I originally believed was the punctum of the image changes and I am directed to a new puncture that haunts me. If the punctum is revelatory, it is the removal of information through sanding that reveals a 'new truth' for me. Just as Barthes punctum activates his engagement of the photographic image, sanding is a method of physically engaging with my past, re-directing my and the viewer's attention, re-animating the image.

For a few years now I have experimented with the use of silver gilding on intaglio and serigraphic prints, initially as a way of acknowledging the tradition of altar paintings. I use silver and not gold because I wish to imply that what we are looking at is "second best". Like the first runner up in an Olympic event, the silver denotes "almost". A few years before inheriting my aunt's photo collection, it was discovered that our family had a hidden past. I discovered that around the time of Canadian Confederation, my ancestors were relocated from Drummond Island, situated in Georgian Bay, to the military outpost known as Penetanguishene, the town I grew up in.<sup>16</sup> During this displacement a decision was made to hide my family's indigenous past. Coincidentally, it was through a family photograph, a cabinet card, that

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<sup>16</sup> Drummond Island was inhabited by members of the Ojibwe nation and are part of a larger cultural group of Aboriginal peoples known as the Anishinaabeg

I discovered this truth.<sup>17</sup> I believe this hidden Metis background was a source for feelings of inferiority that affected my family for generations.

I began gilding the sanded photographs last year. I feel this is intriguing and appropriate as it is the silver in the photographic emulsion that allows the image vestige to emerge. Unlike the stability of gold, silver oxidizes and becomes a marker of time. By replacing the degraded silver in the emulsion with freshly applied silver leaf I invoke a shift in the perceived duration of time that also adds an uneasy perception of value, floating over seemingly worthless snapshots. The grafting of this shiny skin is both gestural and intentional. Gestural, given the sanding motion that started this work yet intentional given the choices made by past family members to conceal their native identity. Like the ink on a screen print, the silver floats but is adhered to the surface of the paper ground - acting as an intermediary layer between the past and the future that roots the viewer in the present. (see Fig. E)

Fig. E - Timothy Laurin,  
*Lost Farm Hand*, Sanded Contact Print  
with Silver Leaf 2016



### Artist Book of Trading Cards

During my working process I began to wonder what to do with the sentence fragments that write themselves while I sand? Should I visually connect the text

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<sup>17</sup> What is known is during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century; one of my ancestors took a second wife of Ojibwe nationality. I am descended from this coupling.



directly to the sanded photographs and the serigraphic prints, or do I create something separate, yet related? I decided to assemble various images from the archive, in concert with the narrative statements, forming a storyboard similar to what a director might craft when conceiving a film sequence. I have created an artist-book, consisting of two decks - decks of trading cards that the viewer is free to trade with a partner and/or rearrange. The decks are presented on a cast plaster table, reminiscent of the school desks that I spent many hours sitting at during my grade-school years. I envision visitors to the exhibition interacting with these decks, made up of twenty cards each, by strategically trading between each other in the same manner that a young child might exchange hockey cards. Some cards contain only letterpress-imprinted phrases while others have sanded photographs mounted on them (see Fig. F) and others still, contain photographic images, printed with the photo-polymer gravure technique.



Fig. F - Timothy Laurin, *Repoussé*  
Artist book, 2017

By not binding the leaves of the book together, I encourage a new

interpretation of the narrative each time someone engages with it. Following John Cage's faith in chance, I allow the viewer a unique experience as there is little likelihood that the unfolding sequence of the cards would be the same twice. Sontag writes: "Like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to the past. But while traditional arts of historical consciousness attempt to put the past in order, distinguishing the innovative from the retrograde, the central from the marginal, the relevant from the irrelevant or merely interesting, the photographer's approach – like that of the collector – is unsystematic, indeed anti-systematic."<sup>18</sup> The seemingly unsystematic act of candid photography is appropriate for the randomness of these storyboard cards. Participants get to craft a new narrative by rearranging my past.

Furthering the random narrative created by the images in the artist book, I decided to insert the various bodies of text by hand-setting vintage lead type and printing them on the first press I owned, a Vandercook Proofing Press No. 1. Both the lead type and my press date from the mid 1930's. I feel it important to honour the tradition and craftsmanship of early book making by incorporating this technology in my process. It would be much easier to simply create a contemporary photopolymer plate to print these texts, however, the time consuming act of setting individual type, rearrange the leading and hand inking are very much like the time consuming act of sanding photographs. (see Fig. G)

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<sup>18</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.



Fig. G – Letterpress chase with resulting print



Fig. H – Vandercook Proof Press No.1

Taking several hours to set a paragraph, only to print one card, allows me to contemplate time, reassess the narrative and engage with the physicality of the printed word. Unlike texting with a smart-phone, this is not instant but rather could be considered 'slow messaging'. Using the pressure of the press, I manually emboss the handmade card stock - literally pressing the ink and narrative into the page. (see Fig. H)

### **Figures in the Landscape**

Along with the trading card station/artist book and the suite of sanded contact prints, I am presenting a collection of large-format serigraphic prints in the exhibition. Using the same photo archive, sometimes even the same images themselves, I have created a series of 'figures in the landscape' as serigraphs on Mylar. Again, I have decided to avoid the seduction of colour and use only monochromatic inks of either white and/or grey as a way of referencing the source; black and white negatives.

Serigraphy is my chosen method of printmaking for this series because, just as the original photograph is composed of a granular matrix, the screen grid and the pixilation of the image are visually evident in the final work. Like the original photograph, created when light exposed the negative, the serigraphic screen is created by exposing a light-sensitive emulsion that has been previously applied to a screen. Mylar is an appropriate ground for these images as it is immediately recognizable as a contemporary material and sets up a shift from the vintage photographic image. The translucency of polyester Mylar invokes veiling or concealment while at the same time allows the viewer to partially penetrate visually what is just beyond that layer. This visual barrier obstructs the viewer's perception - much like the inaccuracy of my own memory. These semi-transparent prints are presented unframed, casually layered and floating over the actual film that was used to burn the printing screen. The dense, black ink on the clear acetate film is a reminder of the tiny negative that houses the original image.

Like the sanded contact prints, I often incorporate silver gilding on these large serigraphs as a way of pulling the physicality of these works back to the analogue photograph and silver oxide. Unlike the translucency of Mylar, the fields of silver leaf are densely opaque, arresting the viewer's gaze on the surface. Just as I intentionally sand select areas of the photographs to guide the viewer around the image, the areas of silver allow me to direct the observer's attention. An unexpected effect of incorporating large areas of silver means the viewer's physical presence becomes increasingly evident. While the silver leaf surface isn't a true, mirror-like reflection, it

does cast changing tones and colour from the viewer as they move. The print is animated in both beautiful and unsettling ways. The viewer's reflected light is now physically part of the print experience and announces a unique moment, marking a time when the viewer is present, physically and intellectually.

If we examine a few of the serigraphic prints we see figures that are recognizable by their stance and gesture although they lack the facial details that usually render figures recognizable. In the *Unknown Fisherman* (see Fig 1) a young man, perhaps my uncle or perhaps a well-known landscape painter is centrally flanked by an iconic Canadian landscape. The anonymous sportsman is casually presenting his catch of fish, one in each hand, suggesting that he is simply doing his duty as hunter and provider. This is not a trophy catch - it is a documentation of a basic life ritual. This over-exposed negative has produced a solid area on the screen and subsequently I created an open field of Mylar where his face should be and while we do not see the figure's eyes, we recognize that the gaze is forward. This lack of facial expression forces the image to communicate through the performativity of gesture. The absent portrait acts as translucent movie screen for the viewer to superimpose the face of someone from his or her own memory. The offering of fish could reference the biblical miracle of feeding the masses as described in Christian mythology. The intersection of the hills behind the figure's torso forms a crucifix in the visual field while his arms are gently rising, pulling him into a cruciform pose. I am reminded by many elements in this print that I was raised as a Catholic.



Fig. I – Timothy Laurin, *Unknown Fisherman*, Serigraph on Mylar, 2016



Fig. J – Timothy Laurin, *Silver Lake Lumberjack*, Serigraph on Mylar with silver leaf, 2017

With the print, *Silver Lake Lumberjack*, (Fig J) another lone male figure is captured mid-swing, chopping wood. This forceful, aggressive gesture is set once again in front of a landscape of water, trees and rock; a landscape so familiar to me. Here I have decided to depict the lake as a sheet of silver. Am I suggesting the lake is frozen over? Is the reflective silver leaf standing in for a glassy sheet of ice? Is this figure chopping wood to keep warm in the coming months? I am very aware that while the Canadian

landscape is beautiful it is also harsh. I have drawn attention to the lake and the hardship it can cause because I often wondered what my great grandmother must have dealt with when forced to leave her island home and form a new life many years ago. This lumberjack is simultaneously her son and my son at the same time.

### Conclusion:

If we exam one of the last works produced before the exhibition, we will see a culmination of the various interests that I have addressed in this paper. In the work, *Silvered Youth*, we again see a figure positioned against a landscape. (see Fig K)



Fig. K – Timothy Laurin, *Silvered Youth*, Serigraph on Mylar with aluminum leaf, 2017

This young male is shirtless, standing on a dock holding a fishing rod. He gazes down towards the water, perhaps thinking about the prized fish he pursues. A body of water and a hillside, complete with iconic wind-swept pine trees flank the figure. I have chosen to gild the torso of the subject in aluminum leaf, aluminum because unlike silver, it will not tarnish over time. I want to suggest that this youth is ‘untarnished’ and will remain so. The exposed skin, skin of aluminum, is visually impenetrable and for me represents the purity of innocence. The youth depicted is on the verge of manhood and is probably at an age of sexual awakening. His right hand is gripping his phallic fishing rod. The end of his rod extends beyond the picture frame



and is hidden from our view. His classically positioned torso is relaxed to suggest that he is either alone or unaware of being photographed. A body of water surrounds him and while he is not immersed in it, we can image that he may baptize himself with a swim after his hunt. I was first drawn to this photograph by the sheer beauty of this unknown youth and wondered who he was and why he was in my aunt's collection of images. While applying the reflective leaf onto the Mylar before printing the image, I saw my reflection and realized that I projected myself onto his image and that I longed to once again innocent. Perhaps this image resonates because we can imagine ourselves as this subject, existing in an uncomplicated time where a warm afternoon fishing was our only pursuit. I want to become this beautiful youth.

As a maker, I am motivated by the physicality of the image. I possess a need to alter and materially fix imagery derived from the amateur snapshot, especially those photos that appear unresolved and allude to my family's narrative. I enjoy engaging in the physicality of the analogue photograph. The recorded truths of these images aid me in connecting to my past. The research, which resulted in this exhibition, was motivated by my desire to reveal, rearranges and retell my family's heritage. Through the ritualistic act of sanding, printing, gilding and storytelling, I can now accept and celebrate my once concealed Ojibwe identity with pride. When we hold a photograph we are reminded that we are visiting the lives of our past, framed like a window, we look in on something old, yet new. The maker is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it.

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